

## **Testimony before the Human Services Committee**

### **H.B. 6616 An Act Concerning Expansion of HUSKY Health Benefits to Those Ineligible Due to Immigration Status**

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Dear Senator Lesser, Representative Gilchrist, and distinguished members of the Human Services Committee,

My name is Dr. Brianna Muñoz, and I am a board-certified pediatric dentist. On behalf of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD), I fulfill the role of public policy advocate for the state of Connecticut and serve on the Pediatric Dental Medicaid & CHIP Advisory Committee. As a registered voter in the Town of Suffield, it is my personal and professional goal to promote the oral health of all Connecticut residents irrespective race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

In advancing this aim, I am testifying in support of H.B. 6616 to expand access of HUSKY health benefits to all Connecticut residents who are income eligible up to age 26, regardless of immigration status.

Oral health is inexorably linked to systemic health, and untreated dental disease can lead to significant pain and spreading infection. Nationwide, there is one dental-related ER visit every 15 seconds costing the health system \$1.6 billion annually. Yet 80% of these visits are considered preventable.<sup>1</sup> In the state of Connecticut, an emergency Medicaid plan exists that covers all individuals, including immigrants, who qualify for HUSKY based upon income eligibility. The cost of this emergency safety net amounted to \$15 million in 2021.<sup>2</sup> There has been a blatant misuse of emergency services to treat chronic diseases that could have otherwise been prevented or managed in a way to avoid costly hospitalization. By increasing access to health insurance for Connecticut immigrants, there would be a \$63 million reduction in the cost of uncompensated hospital care.<sup>2</sup> Through the expansion of HUSKY, this bill would increase the utilization of preventive services, improve the accessibility of care, decrease ER visits, and save money for the health system overall.

Expanding access to dental services is critical in order to alleviate the plight of oral health care disparities that currently plague the nation. Five times more common than asthma, dental decay is the most common chronic disease of childhood with the highest prevalence amongst marginalized populations.<sup>3</sup> Immigrant status in particular has been associated with poor oral

health outcomes, such as periodontal disease and tooth decay. Having dental insurance would close this gap and reduce disparities by increasing access to care.<sup>4</sup>

It is estimated that 70% of pediatric dentists treat children on Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), or both. This is more than any other dental specialty and comprises about one third of the patient population.<sup>5</sup> While HUSKY was expanded for immigrant children up to age 12, our work does not end here. Dental disease is a chronic process that has an increased likelihood of developing with increasing age. The need for dental insurance does not end at age 12. Due to poor oral health and subsequent tooth pain, children are four times more likely to miss school<sup>6</sup> and adults have a higher propensity of missing work<sup>7</sup>. Looking beyond age 12, late adolescence and early adulthood is a common time to warrant the extraction of wisdom teeth. With the adoption of H.B. 6616, Connecticut immigrants would be covered up to age 26.

The profession of pediatric dentistry is committed to improving access to care and expanding HUSKY eligibility is one way that high risk families can receive the comprehensive dental care that they so desperately need. When parents are insured, children are more likely to have insurance and to develop ongoing relationships with health care providers. The converse is also true. Expanding HUSKY will promote healthy individuals and subsequently healthy families.

Health is a right and not a privilege. For these reasons, I urge you to extend HUSKY eligibility to all income eligible residents up to the age of 26, regardless of immigration status. Thank you for your time and for supporting young people in Connecticut.



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